# The Governor's Commission on Mental Retardation & The Governor's Commission on Employment for

People with Disabilities

**Employment: Massachusetts Conversations on Disabilities** 

This is a summary report of the Employment Forums conducted on November 16, 2006 in Dedham, MA and November 21, 2006 in Chicopee, MA

# Employment: Massachusetts Conversations on Disabilities

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# **Employment: Massachusetts Conversations on Disabilities**

#### The Commonwealth of Massachusetts

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### **Employment: Massachusetts Conversations on Disability Summary Report of East/West Massachusetts Forums**

A key component of the American Dream for all citizens is the ability to be productive contributors to society and the recognition of the value of work. Unfortunately for one segment of our population this is still far from their grasp. The employment rate of individuals with disabilities is less than half that of people without disabilities, despite the fact that many people with disabilities want to work. In 2005, 37% of working-age adults with disabilities in Massachusetts were employed, compared to 77% of working-age adults without any disability. These figures are comparable to the rates for the United States as a whole, where 37% of adults with disabilities and 74% of those without disabilities were employed (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005 American Community Survey). In addition, the aging of America will have significant influences on the labor pool. As of 2005, 35 million people in the United States, including 797,000 in Massachusetts (about 12% of the population), were of retirement age. By 2030, projections indicate 70 million people in the United States will be ready to retire. There will be significantly more jobs than workers. These statistics provided compelling evidence of the need to address this issue. We need to tap into another labor force—individuals with disabilities who are eager and willing to work.

The Governor's Commission on Mental Retardation in conjunction with the Governor's Commission on Employment of People with Disabilities sponsored two employment forums. The purpose of the forums was to hear from key stakeholders—business leaders, service providers, career center staff, consumers and family members regarding strategies for developing successful employment for individuals with disabilities.

This following summary highlights the key strategies articulated for seeking and maintaining meaningful employment, describes some of the barriers to employment that still exist, and offers recommendations for future action.

#### East Forum, Dedham, MA

The East Forum was held on November 16, 2006. Presenters included a service provider, a disability navigator, an employer, individuals with disabilities, and family members.

#### Successful strategies

Panel members commonly mentioned the following strategies as successful in gaining and maintaining employment for people with disabilities:

Relationship building. Relationship building includes outreach to employers and strong networking. Form partnerships with employers, educate employers, heighten awareness about employees with disabilities, communicate frequently, and follow-up often. Get your face and name known by managers, CEOs, and those who make the decisions in the company. One service provider suggested maintaining a list of all previous contacts that can be sorted by industry. Additionally, a disability navigator suggested using the one-stop career centers since many of them have already established relationships with

employers. From an employer's perspective, understanding the hiring process and ensuring clear communication every step of the way are essential components of building solid relationships. Well-trained job coaches who will provide appropriate support, communicate effectively, and check in frequently are also vital for establishing relationships with employers. Networking is also an important role for family members.

Collaboration. Collaboration and commitment of agencies (community, state, and federal), schools, communities, medical professionals, individuals, family members, one-stops, and employers is a key strategy for success. Work as a team towards a common goal, involve all stakeholders, and meet and communicate frequently. One example of collaboration is sharing information about job leads with other job developers to decrease competition for available jobs. Another common suggestion for collaboration was to form partnerships between school systems and adult agencies, and high schools and community colleges. Bringing employers into the schools and equipping individuals with specific skills to fill the businesses' needs was also suggested.

Job-matching. Identifying a person's unique interests, likes, skills, and personality is critical for gaining employment successfully. This process should be personal, thoughtful, and individualized. Conduct job trials, job tours, and perform job and task analyses. Identify what the employers' needs are and match an individual to a job based on his or her interests and talents. Know the details of the job and be able to ask very specific questions. One person expressed that creating a plan for each individual is helpful in securing employment; another person mentioned the need for a focus. A related comment was to focus on what the individual can do, not what they can't, and to view the individual with a disability primarily as a "qualified job applicant."

Job readiness. One aspect of job readiness is a well-developed resume. Career centers and provider agencies can offer support and advice regarding resume creation and development. One suggestion is to start building resumes early by encouraging youth to participate in leadership programs, internships, volunteer experiences, and summer employment opportunities. Target transition-aged youth, encourage them to enter employment early and start building bridges to employment opportunities. Seeking volunteer and part-time positions are useful resume-building strategies for both youth and adults. Being interview ready is another component of job readiness. Teach and practice interview skills, and instruct job seekers about appropriate interview attire and appearance. Additionally, individuals need to be committed to work and need to see the value in work in order to be job ready.

Perseverance. Staying after employers, continually showing up and building relationships, and staying proactive and positive are elements that lead to successful employment for individuals with disabilities. It is also important to acknowledge and accept that relationship building, job matching, and job readiness preparation take time to develop. As a family member, do not take no for an answer, be creative and flexible, and do not let the system frustrate you.

**Barriers.** In addition to identifying key strategies that are successful in securing employment for people with disabilities, panel members also described some barriers to employment, such as:

Transportation. Most panel members agreed that The RIDE is unreliable and makes getting to work difficult. The accessibility of the T is a huge problem as well. The issue of transportation limits the range for job seeking, making it more difficult to gain employment. Several panel members also indicated that often time transit is unresponsive causing much anxiety and concern for working consumers. Consumers and family members felt powerless in attempting to communicate with a "large" transportation bureaucracy.

Inconsistent approaches to transition. Despite the promise in targeting transition-aged youth and collaborating with schools, agencies, and employers, there is considerable variation across school systems in the level of effort toward transition. For example, some schools have been able to use resources flexibly to support youth in community employment, while others have struggled to provide supports outside the classroom. The majority of panelists indicated that successful transitions to employment settings need to be prioritized as part of the planning for all eligible students. Unfortunately, best practices were cited as few to many to acknowledge. There was also considerable discussion about the lack of available information about what successful programs are available and how to access this information. State agencies were cited for their lack of consistent collaboration efforts and most participants agreed that the DOE needs to be brought into planning sessions earlier in order to effectively implement transition plans for young adults that support and encourage successful employment opportunities.

Benefits. Making the transition off of benefits is still difficult for individuals with disabilities and serves as a barrier to seeking employment. Many families were unclear about the positive implications of benefit packages and compensation packages offered by companies.

#### West Forum, Chicopee, MA

The West Forum was held on November 21, 2006. Presenters included employers that represented large and small companies, a service provider, a career counselor, a disability navigator, individuals with disabilities, and family members.

**Successful strategies.** Panel members commonly mentioned the following strategies as successful in gaining and maintaining employment for people with disabilities:

Relationship building. Relationship building is a key theme for successfully obtaining employment. Relationship building begins with good prospecting: look for employers and decision-makers who seem more civic-minded, are willing to work with the community, and train their managers to work with a diverse workforce. Always deliver more than you promised, and be sure to thank people and employers. Another aspect of relationship building is developing an understanding of the employers' needs. For example, individuals need to understand the hiring process and that although accommodations may be made, the established steps must be followed and one should

not try to skirt any aspect of this process. Relationship building also entails following-up, getting people out, and getting people noticed so that when a job opens up, an employer will already have a relationship with you. Another component to relationship building is having support personnel who can assist during trainings and orientations, help with keeping track of schedules, are flexible, and communicate clearly with employers. Job coaches who work side-by-side with employees and managers, and who follow-up frequently can also help maintain good relationships. Ultimately, the goal is to move from relationships into partnerships, in which all entities support each other.

Collaboration. Collaboration between high schools, employers, one-stops, agencies, and individuals is an important strategy for successful employment. One employer described a program at her hospital in which high school students spend part of their day doing schoolwork and part of their day gaining work experience at the hospital. The collaboration between the school and the hospital has been successful in securing full-time employment for some of the program participants. One of the consumers attended a program that was half education and half work experience. Creating Business Advisory Boards and holding trainings open to employers have also been helpful in forming and strengthening collaboration among a variety of stakeholders. Another example of collaboration is the "Ready, Set, Hire" partnership among Western Massachusetts employment agencies. One important aspect of collaboration is the need to feel supported by everyone involved, every step of the way.

Matchmaking. Matching agencies with employers and individuals with jobs is essential for successful employment. Focusing on one's successes, highlighting abilities, identifying interests, and sharing this information with employers are important elements of creating good matches. Also, understanding the specifics of each open position and what skills are required for that position will aid in the matching process. A career counselor suggested that easing into employment by volunteering or working part-time is a good way to explore different careers, wants, and abilities. A consumer urged audience members to consider self-employment as the best match for some individuals.

Job readiness. Gaining any sort of work-related experience to beef up one's resume, doing mock interviews, and attending trainings are strategies for preparing an individual for employment. Using the One Stop Career Centers to learn how to search for a job, develop a resume, and talk about oneself positively is a key element of job readiness and a strategy for successfully gaining employment. Job readiness and employment preparation should begin early, much before age 22. Creating a step-by-step plan for attaining employment can be a helpful strategy as well.

Perseverance. Understanding that the employment process takes time and effort is crucial in successfully achieving gainful employment. Relationship building, finding good matches and identifying ones interests, building resumes and becoming job ready, and undergoing the process of seeking and finding meaningful employment requires perseverance and persistence.

**Barriers.** In addition to identifying key strategies that are successful in securing employment for people with disabilities, panel members also described some barriers to employment, such as:

Judgment. Employers are often too quick to judge. They have a thought in their minds before they even meet a person. Snap judgment is still a barrier facing individuals with disabilities who are seeking employment.

*Transportation.* Transportation continues to be troublesome. Not having access to reliable transportation impedes individuals with disabilities from gaining and maintaining employment. For example, an individual with a disability and a family member both noted the unreliability of the PVTA vans.

Scheduling. One employer commented that the lack of job coach availability for night and weekend shifts was a barrier to having people with disabilities fill the available positions at the hospital.

Benefits. Fear of losing disability benefits such as SSI and SSDI was suggested by an audience member as a barrier to employment for people with developmental disabilities, but the panel members mostly thought it would be okay to lose benefits if they had a good job with good pay.

#### **Parallel Themes**

#### Successful strategies.

Relationship building. In both forums, participants emphasized the importance of relationship building - especially relationships with employers. Job coaches, family members, and individuals with disabilities can all contribute to networking and relationship building that eventually leads to employment. This is a particularly important role for job coaches, who must understand both what the individuals they support have to offer an employer and what employers are looking for - not just the job requirements but expectations for the application and interview process as well.

Collaboration. A related theme was collaboration. Positive examples were presented of collaboration both among similar entities (such as service providers) and among different organizations (between employers and service providers, between service providers and schools, between employers and schools). For example, collaborations between service providers and/or job coaches (such as the Ready, Set, Hire program in Western Mass.) can aid more effective job matching by sharing job leads and connections. Collaboration between high schools and adult service providers can ease the transition from school to work. Collaboration between employers and schools or service providers can create both a source of jobs for individuals with disabilities and a source of employees for the employers.

Job-matching. Matching the right people with the right jobs was often cited as essential to good employment services. Doing so requires emphasizing an individual's strengths

and qualifications, rather than his or her disability. Good job matching also requires understanding an individual's interests and working to find the right job to fit with those interests.

Job readiness. Job readiness preparation can start even when an individual is still in school, with internships, volunteer work, and/or part-time work. Such steps as doing volunteer work in the area of interest can be an important resume-builder for anyone seeking employment. In addition, job readiness involves having good interview skills, including knowing how to dress appropriately.

*Perseverance.* Finally, it is important to understand that all of these tactics (relationship-building, job readiness preparation, and proper job matching) can take time. Patience and persistence are necessary for job coaches, individuals with disabilities, and family members.

#### **Barriers**

*Transportation.* The unreliability of available sources of transportation (such as The RIDE and PVTA) was cited by individuals, family members, and providers as a barrier to employment success.

Benefits concerns. Concerns about losing SSI/SSDI/Medicaid benefits if an individual earns too much by working were brought up by panel or audience members at both sessions. Especially for adults who have been on benefits and not worked for a while, the fear of losing benefits can be a real barrier to employment. This issue is also related to the need to set the expectation of employment early on; fears of losing benefits seemed to be less of an issue among younger panel members who had worked from a young age.

#### Recommendations

The Governor's Commission on Mental Retardation and the Governor's Commission on Employment of People with Disabilities would like to acknowledge the many parents, professionals, clinicians, consumers, direct care staff, employers and concerned citizens who spoke with much zest and conviction at these forums. The Commonwealth has made significant strides in improving attitudes and avenues for individuals with disabilities to obtain employment, however there is still much work to be done in order to increase employment opportunities for the numbers of consumers with disabilities who are transitioning out of high schools with little hope of permanent employment settings as well as the number of adults who remain on the roles of the unemployed. These forums provided some insight and guidance regarding successful strategies and identified some ongoing challenges and barriers toward full inclusion in the workplace.

Specifically, the Governor's Commission Mental Retardation recommends:

 Share the advice, guidance and strategies regarding transition gleaned from these forums with the Governor's Commission on Mental Retardation sub committee on transition and encourage a renewed dialogue with representatives from DOE and other key stakeholders about the value of employment as a successful transition outcome. There are a variety of partners who can contribute to this effort including, one stop career centers, community colleges, special education departments, case managers, providers and families who can assist in planning for students to graduate with post secondary options that are valued and meaningful. In addition, families need to better understand that creating successful employment settings take time and a collaborative team effort. Additional orientation and training regarding employment planning and team development should be encouraged in family support plans.

- Increase awareness of the existence and value of employment training specialists that are available within the Commonwealth. There are numerous job coaches, job placement staff, one stop career counselors, program navigators and others who have years of expertise and experience in securing and maintaining successful employment settings. Access to these critical linkages would be advantageous for consumers and families and assist service providers and agency staff who are having difficulty securing work sites. This effort could be linked with the DMR Regional Employment Team initiatives and activities that are currently under discussion.
- Create a strategy to recognize the contributions that employment training specialists (job coaches) and or job placement staff have made in assisting consumers served by the Department to move into integrated employment settings (supported employment and individual placement without supports). This employment recognition could be linked to the already existing activities of the Department in recognizing others who have made a significant contribution to increasing the quality of life and inclusion of consumers with mental retardation and other developmental disabilities.
- Initiate discussions with key stakeholders including EOHHS, DMR, MRC, MCB, MCDHH and Massachusetts Office on Disability regarding transportation. Representatives in both forums indicated that unless consumers have access to reliable and accessible transportation, they will not be able to secure employment. Much criticism was cited about THE RIDE and other transit authorities for not picking up consumers on time or leaving prior to scheduled appointments. There is also a concern about the lack of transportation outside of urban areas such as Boston, Springfield and Worcester and much continued dialogue needs to occur to identify alternate solutions for individuals in rural towns. Transportation should not be the impediment to obtaining employment.

Specifically the Governor's Commission on Employment of Persons with Disabilities recommends:

 Identify strategies that employers have used to seek out, hire, maintain and advance employees with disabilities in their own companies. The emphasis will be on career development and advancement as well as access to employment and what have been the most successful practices that employers have used. The acknowledgement could be in the form of an event, a certificate or a brief publication from the Department of Workforce Development.

 Develop a recognition strategy for One Stop Career Centers that have demonstrated an ability to assist job seekers with disabilities in entering employment. This would showcase effective practices and be a vehicle to demonstrate how One Stops can serve all job seekers including those who have a disability.

#### **Shared activities of both Commissions**

- Celebrate the success of selected consumers and employers who have made employment work. This could demonstrate and serve as a case study design that would be a joint venture of the two Commissions and serve as a marketing strategy for the agencies involved as well as the employers.
- Host a second series of forums in 12 months with these focusing on successful
  cases and ways that employers and consumers have made employment work.
   These conversations will focus on what has been accomplished and what more
  can be done in the future.
- Host an employer-specific forum for sharing of ideas and best practices among employers. This event could be tied in with the existing Exemplary Employer Awards ceremony and would serve to recognize positive strategies that have utilized by employers for hiring, maintaining, and advancing employees with disabilities.

This summary report and findings serve as a vehicle to engage and energize system planners and policy leaders in creating additional opportunities to enhance employment for individuals with disabilities. The Governor's Commission on Mental Retardation and the Governor's Commission on Employment of Persons with Disabilities welcome the opportunity to encourage and facilitate those discussions. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts has been touted as a vibrant and exciting place to work—this opportunity should be expanded to include all citizens in that effort.